The MYSTERY of the BOULE CABINET

BY

BURTON E. STEVENSON

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CHAPTER XI.

I Part With the Boule Cabinet.

THE coroner's inquest was held next day. The police had discovered practically no new evidence, none certainly which shed any light on the way in which Drouet and Philip Vantine had met death.

Police Commissioner Grady did not go on the stand. He was not at the inquest. The case had been placed in Simmonds' hands, and it was he who testified on behalf of the police, admitting candidly that they were all at sea. But he had not abandoned hope and was still working on the case.

The end of the hearing was that the jury brought in a verdict that Philip Vantine and Georges Drouet had died from the effects of a poison administered by a person or persons unknown.

Godfrey joined me at the door as I was leaving.

"I was glad to hear Simmonds confess that the police are up a tree," he said. "Of course Grady is trying to sneak out of it. I'll see that Simmonds gets a square deal."

"We're all up a tree, aren't we?" I said. "Since my theory about the Boule cabinet exploded I have given up hope. By the way, I'm going to turn the cabinet over to its owner tomorrow."

"To its owner?" he repeated, his eyes narrowing. "Yes, I thought he'd be around for it, though I hardly thought he'd come so soon. Who does it happen to be, Lester?"

"Why," I said, a little impatiently, "you know as well as I do that it belongs to Armand & Son."

"You've seen their representative, then?" he queried, with a little flush of excitement.

"He came to see me yesterday. I'd like you to meet him, Godfrey. He is Felix Armand, the 'son' of the firm, and one of the most finished gentlemen I ever met."

"I'd like to meet him," said Godfrey, smiling queerly. "Perhaps I shall, some day. I hope so, anyway. But how did he explain the blunder, Lester?"

"In some way they shipped the wrong cabinet to Vantine. The right one will get here on La Provence tomorrow."

"It is all most interesting," Godfrey commented.

"Godfrey," I added, "I felt yesterday when I was talking with him that perhaps he knew more about this affair than he would admit. I could see that he guessed in an instant who the owner of the letters was, and what they contained. Do you think I ought to hold on to the cabinet a while longer? I could invent some pretext for delay, easily enough."

"Why, no, let him have his cabinet," said Godfrey, with an alacrity that surprised me. "If your theory about it has been exploded, what's the use of hanging on to it?"

"I don't see any use in doing so," I admitted, "but I thought perhaps you might want more time to examine it."

"I've examined it all I'm going to," Godfrey answered, and I told myself that this was the first time I had ever known him to admit himself defeated. "Perhaps I'll see you tomorrow," he added, as we parted at the corner.

But I did not see him on the morrow. I was rather expecting a call from him during the morning, and when none came I was certain I should find him awaiting me when I arrived at the Vantine house, in company with M. Armand. But he was not there, and when I asked for him Parks told me that he had not seen him since the day before.

I confess that Godfrey's indifference to the fate of the cabinet surprised me greatly; besides, I was hoping that he would wish to meet the fascinating Frenchman—more fascinating, if possible, than he had been on Monday. There had been less delay than he had anticipated in getting the cabinet off the boat and through the customs, and it was not yet 3 o'clock when we reached the Vantine house.

"I haven't seen Mr. Godfrey," Parks repeated, "but there's others here as it fair breaks my heart to see."

He motioned toward the door of the music room, and, stepping to it, I saw that the inventory was already in progress.

"The cabinet is in the room across the hall," I said to M. Armand, and led the way through the anteroom into the room beyond.

Parks switched on the lights for us, and my companion glanced with surprise at the heavy shutters covering the windows.

"We put those up for a protection," I explained. "We had an idea that some one would try to enter. In fact, one evening we did find a wire connecting with the burglar alarm cut, and, later on, saw some one peering in through the hole in that shutter yonder."

"You did?" M. Armand queried quickly. "Would you recognize the man, if you were to meet him again?"

"Oh, no; you see the hole is quite small. There was nothing visible except a pair of eyes. Yet I might know them again, for I never before saw such eyes—so bright, so burning."

M. Armand was gazing at the cabinet, apparently only half listening.

"Will you show me how the secret drawer is operated, Mr. Lester?" he said. "I am most curious about it."

I placed my hand upon the table and pressed the three points which the veiled lady had shown us. The little handle fell forward with a click, and I pulled the drawer open.

He examined it with much interest; pushed it back into place and then opened it himself.

"Very clever, indeed," he said. "I have never seen another so well concealed."

"My friend and I went over the cabinet very carefully and could not find it," I said.

"Your friend—I think you mentioned his name?"

"Yes. His name is Godfrey."

"A man of the law, like yourself?"

"Oh, no, a newspaperman. But he had been a member of the detective force before that. He is extraordinarily keen. But that combination was too much for him."

M. Armand snapped the drawer back into place with a little crash.

"I am glad, at any rate, that it was discovered," he said. "I will not conceal from you, Mr. Lester, that it adds not a little to the value of the cabinet."

"What is its value?" I asked. "Mr. Vantine wanted me to buy it for him and named a most extravagant figure as the limit he was willing to pay."

"Really," M. Armand answered after an instant's hesitation, "I would not care to name a figure, Mr. Lester, without further consultation with my father."

"What is it, Parks?" I said as that worthy appeared at the door.

"There's a van outside, sir," he said, "and a couple of men are unloading a piece of furniture. Is it all right, sir?"

"Yes," I answered. "Have them bring it in here, and ask the man in charge of the inventory to step over here a minute. Mr. Vantine left his collection of art objects to the Metropolitan Museum," I explained to M. Armand, "and I should like the representative of the museum to be present when the exchange is made."

"Certainly," he assented. "That is very just."

Parks was back in a moment, piloting two men who carried between them an object swathed in burlap, and the Metropolitan man followed them in.

"I am Mr. Lester," I said to him. "Mr. Vantine's executor, and this is M. Felix Armand of Armand & Son of Paris. We are correcting an error which was made just before Mr. Vantine died. That cabinet yonder was shipped him by mistake in place of one which he had bought. M. Armand has caused the right one to be sent over and will take away the one which belongs to him. I have already spoken to the museum's attorney about the matter, but I wished you to be present when the exchange was made."

"That is a very handsome piece," said the Metropolitan man. "I am sorry the museum is not to get it."

The two men meanwhile, under M. Armand's direction, had been stripping the wrappings from the other cabinet, and it finally stood revealed. It, too, was a beautiful piece of furniture, but even my untrained eye could see how greatly it fell below the other.

"The other cabinet is yours," I said to M. Armand.

"I shall hope to see you again, Mr. Lester," he said, with a cordiality which flattered me, "and to renew our very pleasant acquaintance. Whenever you are in Paris I trust you will not fail to honor me by letting me know."

"Thank you," I said. "I shall certainly remember that invitation. And meanwhile, since you are here in New York"—

"You are most kind," he broke in, "and I was myself hoping that we might at least dine together. But I am compelled to proceed to Boston this evening, and from there I shall go on to Quebec."

Then he signed to the two men to take up the cabinet and himself laid a protecting hand upon it as it was carried through the door and down the steps to the van which was backed up to the curb. It was lifted carefully inside, the two men clambered in beside it, the driver spoke to the horses, and the van rolled slowly away up the avenue.

M. Armand watched it for a moment, then mounted into the cab which was waiting, waved a last farewell to me and followed after the van. We watched it until it turned westward at the first cross street.

"Mr. Godfrey's occupation will be gone," said Parks, with a little laugh. "He has fairly lived with that cabinet for the past three or four days. He was here last night for quite awhile."

"Last night?" I echoed, surprised. "I was sure he would be here today," I added.

The next instant I was jumping down the steps two at a time, for a cab in which two men were sitting came down the avenue and rolled slowly around the corner in the direction taken by the van. One of its occupants turned toward me and waved his hand, and I recognized Jim Godfrey.

It was with a certain vexation of spirit that I found myself racing after Godfrey's cab, for I realized that he had not been entirely frank with me. Certainly he had dropped no hint of his intention to follow Armand.

And it suddenly dawned upon me that even I did not know the cabinet's destination. M. Armand had volunteered no information.

I reached the corner in time to see the van turn northward into Sixth avenue. At Sixteenth street it turned westward again, and then northward into Seventh avenue.

What could Armand be doing in this part of the town? I asked myself. Did he propose to leave that priceless cabinet in this dingy quarter? And then I paused abruptly and slipped into an archway, for the van had stopped some distance ahead and was backing up to the curb.

Looking out discreetly, I saw the cab containing Armand stop also, and that gentleman alighted and paid the driver. The other cab rattled on at a good pace and disappeared up the avenue. Then the two porters lifted out the cabinet and, with Armand showing them the way, carried it into the building before which the van had stopped.

They were gone perhaps five minutes, from which I argued that they were carrying it upstairs; then they reappeared, with Armand accompanying them. He tipped them and went out also to tip the driver of the van. Then the porters climbed aboard, and it rattled away out of sight. Armand stood for a moment on the step, looking up and down the avenue, then disappeared indoors.

An instant later I saw Godfrey and another man whom I recognized as Simmonds come out of a shop across the street and dash over to the house into which the cabinet had been taken. They were standing on the doorstep when I joined them.

It was a dingy building, entirely typical of the dingy neighborhood. The ground floor was occupied by a laundry which the sign on the front window declared to be French, and the room which the window lighted extended the whole width of the building except for a door which opened presumably on the stairway leading to the upper stories.

Godfrey's face was flaming with excitement as he turned the knob of this door gently—gently. The door was locked. He stooped and applied an eye to the keyhole.

"The key is in the lock," he whispered.

Simmonds took from his pocket a pair of slender pliers and passed them over.

Godfrey inserted the pliers in the keyhole, grasped the end of the key and turned it slowly.

"Now!" he said, softly opened the door and slipped inside. I followed, and Simmonds came after me like a shadow, closing the door carefully behind him.

Then we all stopped, and my heart, at least, was in my mouth, for from somewhere overhead came the sound of a man's voice talking excitedly.

Even in the semidarkness I could see the look of astonishment and alarm on Godfrey's face as he stood for a moment motionless, listening to that voice. I also stood with ears a-strain, but I could make nothing of what it was saying. Then suddenly I realized that it was speaking in French. And yet it was not Armand's voice—of that I was certain.

Fronting us was a narrow stair mounting steeply to the story overhead, and after that moment's amazed hesitation Godfrey sat down on the bottom step and removed his shoes quietly, motioning us to do the same. Simmonds obeyed phlegmatically, but my hands were trembling.

When I looked up Godfrey and Simmonds were stealing slowly up the stair, revolver in hand. I followed them, but I confess my knees were knocking together, for there was something weird and chilling in that voice going on and on. It sounded like the voice of a madman. There was something about it at once ferocious and triumphant.

Godfrey paused an instant at the stair head, listening intently. Then he moved cautiously forward toward an open door, from which the voice seemed to come, motioning us at the same time to stay where we were. And as I knelt, bathed in perspiration, I caught one word, repeated over and over:

"Revenge, revenge, revenge!"

CHAPTER XII.

"Death."

GODFREY, on hands and knees, was peering into the room. Then he drew back and motioned us forward.

In the middle of the floor stood the Boule cabinet, and before it, with his back to the door, stood a man ripping savagely away the strips of burlap in which it had been wrapped, talking to himself the while in a sort of savage singsong and pausing from moment to moment to glance at a huddled bundle lying on the floor against the opposite wall. For a time I could not make out what this bundle was. Then, straining my eyes, I saw that it was the body of a man, wrapped

I Saw the Cab Containing Armand Stop.

round and round in some weblike fabric.

And as I stared at him I caught the glitter of his eyes as he watched the man working at the cabinet—a glitter not to be mistaken—the same glitter which had so frightened me once before. What was the meaning of this ferocious scene?

My heart leaped into my throat, for Godfrey, with a sharp cry of "Stop!" sprang to his feet and dashed into the room, Simmonds at his heels.

I suppose two seconds elapsed before I reached the threshold, and I stopped there, staring, clutching at the wall to steady myself.

There was the cabinet with its wrappings torn away, but the figure on the floor had disappeared, and before an open doorway into another room stood a man, a giant of a man, his hands above his head, his face working with fear and rage, while Godfrey, his lips curling into a mocking smile, pressed a pistol against his breast.

Then, as I stood there staring, it seemed to me that there was a sort of flicker in the air above the man's head, and he screamed shrilly.

"Death!" he shrieked. "Death!"

For one dreadful instant longer he stood there motionless; then, with a strangled cry, he pitched forward heavily at Godfrey's feet. I have a confused remembrance of Godfrey stooping for an instant above the body, staring at it, and then, with a sharp cry, hurling himself through that open doorway. In a moment Godfrey was back in the room, crossed it at a bound and dashed to the door opening into the hall, just as it was slammed in his face.

I saw him tear desperately at the knob, then retreat two steps and hurl himself against it. But it held firm, and from the hall outside came a burst of mocking laughter that fairly froze my blood.

Simmonds was quicker than I, and together they threw themselves at the door. It cracked ominously, but still held. Again they tried, and this time it split from top to bottom. Godfrey kicked the pieces to either side and slipped between them, Simmonds after him.

I reached the stair head in time to see Godfrey try the front door and then turn along the lower hall leading to the back of the house. An instant later a chorus of frenzied women's shrieks made my hair stand on end.

How I got down the stairs I do not know. But I, too, turned back along the lower hall, expecting any instant to come upon I knew not what horror. I reached an open door, passed through it and found myself in the laundry in the midst of a group of excited and indignant women, who greeted my appearance with a fresh series of screams.

Unable to go farther, I sat limply down upon a box and looked at them. I was still sitting there when Godfrey came back, breathing heavily, chagrin and anger in his eyes.

"A crime has been committed upstairs," he said to the manager. "This gentleman with me is Mr. Simmonds of the detective bureau," and at the words Simmonds showed his shield. "We shall have to notify headquarters," Godfrey went on, "and I would advise that you keep your girls at their work. I don't suppose you want to be mixed up in it."

"Sure not," agreed the manager promptly, and while Simmonds went to the phone and called up police headquarters the manager had the girls back at their work in short order.

Godfrey came over to me and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Why, Lester," he said, "you look as though you were at your last gasp."

"I am," I said. "I'm going to have nervous prostration if this thing keeps up. You're not looking particularly happy yourself."

"I'm not happy. I've let that fellow kill a man right under my nose—literally under my nose—and then get away!"

"Kill a man!" I repeated. "Do you mean"—

"Go upstairs and look at the right hand of the man lying there," said Godfrey curtly, "and you'll see what I mean."

Simmonds joined us with a twisted smile on his lips, and I saw that even he was considerably shaken.

"I got Grady," he said, "and told him what had happened. He says he's too busy to come up and that I'm to take charge of things. The ambulance will be around at once. We'd better get our shoes on and go back upstairs and see if anything can be done for that fellow."

Simmonds knelt beside the body and held up the limp right hand for us to see.

Just above the knuckles were two tiny incisions, with a drop or two of blood oozing away from them, and the flesh about them swollen and discolored.

"I knew what it was the instant he yelled 'Death!'" said Godfrey quietly. "And he knew what it was the instant he felt the stroke. It is evident enough that he had seen it used before or heard of it and knew that it meant instant death."

I sat down, staring at the dead man, and tried to collect my senses. I saw a man roughly dressed, with bushy black hair and tangled beard; a very giant of a man.

A sudden thought brought me bolt upright.

"But Armand!" I cried. "Where is Armand?"

Godfrey looked at me with a half pitying smile.

"What, Lester!" he said, "don't you understand even yet? It was your fascinating M. Armand who did that," and he pointed to the dead man.

I felt as though I had been struck a heavy blow upon the head; black circles whirled before my eyes.

"Was it Armand," I asked, "who lay there in the corner?"

"Certainly it was," Godfrey answered. "Who else could it be?"

"Godfrey!" I cried, remembering suddenly. "Did you see his eyes as he lay there watching the man at the cabinet?"

"Yes; I saw them."

"They were the same eyes?"

"The same eyes."

"And the laugh—did you hear that laugh?"

"Certainly I heard it."

"I heard it once before," I said, "and you thought it was a case of nerves!"

I fell silent a moment, shivering a little at the remembrance.

"But why did Armand lie there so quietly?" I asked at last. "Was he injured?"

Godfrey made a little gesture toward the corner.

"Go see for yourself," he said.

Something lay along the wall, on the other side of the room, where I had seen that figure, and

"Was it Armand who lay there in the corner?"

as I bent over it I saw that it was a large net, finely meshed, but very strong.

"That was dropped over Armand's head as he came up the stairs," said Godfrey, "or flung over him as he came into the room. Then the dead man yonder jumped upon him and trussed him up with those ropes."

Pushing the net aside, I saw upon the floor a little pile of severed cords.

"Yes," I agreed; "he would be able to do that. Have you noticed his size, Godfrey? He was almost a giant!"

"He couldn't have done it if Armand hadn't been willing that he should," retorted Godfrey curtly. "You see he had no difficulty in getting away," and he held up the net and pointed to the great rents in it. "He cut his way out while he was lying here. I ought to have known"—

He threw the net down upon the floor with a gesture of disgust and dispair. Then he stopped in front of the Boule cabinet and looked down at it musingly, and, after a moment, his face brightened. The burlap wrappings had been almost wholly torn away.

"But we'll get him, Simmonds," said Godfrey, and his lips broke into a smile. "In fact, we've got him now. We have only to wait, and he'll walk into our arms. Simmonds, I want you to lock this cabinet up in the strongest cell around at your station, carry the key yourself and give your reasons to nobody."

"That'll be easy," laughed Simmonds. "I haven't got any reasons."

"Oh, yes, you have," and Godfrey bent upon him a gaze that was positively hypnotic. "You will do it because I want you to and because I tell you that, sooner or later, if you keep this cabinet safe where no one can get at it, the man we want will walk into our hands. And I'll tell you more than that, Simmonds; if we do get him, I'll have the biggest story I ever had, and you will be world famous. France will make you a chevalier of the Legion of Honor, Simmonds, mark my words. This fellow is the biggest catch we could make. He's the greatest criminal of modern times."

With Armand, so finished, so self poised, so distinguished, in my mind, and the body of his latest victim before my eyes, I nodded gloomily.

"But, Godfrey, who is this man?" I asked. "Why did he kill that poor fellow up there? Why did he kill Drouet and Vantine? How did he get into the Vantine house? What is it all about?"

"Ah!" he said, looking at me with a smile. "That is the important question—what is it all about! If I can, I'll drop in tonight to see you, and we can thrash it out. Will that suit you?"

"Yes," I said; "and for heaven's sake, don't fail to come!"

That night I had begun to fear that Godfrey was going to disappoint me, so late it was before his welcome knock came at my door. I hastened to let him in, and I could tell by the sigh of relief with which he sank into a chair that he was thoroughly weary.

"If you have an explanation, Godfrey," I said, "for heaven's sake tell me! Tell me first how you and Simmonds came to be following Armand."

"Simply because I had found out he wasn't Armand. Felix Armand is in Paris at this moment. You were too credulous, Lester."

"Why, I never had any doubt of his being Armand," I stammered. "He knew about my cablegram; he knew about the firm's answer"—

"Of course he did, because your cable was never received by the Armands, but by a confederate in this fellow's employ, and it was that confederate who answered it."

"Then you still believe that the cabinet was sent to Vantine by design and not by accident?"

"Absolutely. It was sent by the Armands in good faith because they believed that it had been purchased by Vantine, all of which had been arranged very carefully by the great unknown."

"Tell me how you know all this, Godfrey," I said.

"I cabled our man at Paris to investigate. Our man went at once to the elder Armand and learned a number of very interesting things. One was that the son, Felix Armand, was in Paris; another was that no member of the firm knew anything about your cable or the answer to it; a third was that had the cable been received it would have been understood, because the Armands' books show that this cabinet was bought by Philip Vantine for the sum of 15,000 francs."

"Not this one!" I protested.

"Yes, this one, and it was cheap at the price."

"But Vantine told me himself that he did not buy that cabinet."

"Nor did he. But somebody bought it in his name and directed that it be sent forward to him."

"And paid 15,000 francs for it?"

"Certainly. And paid 15,000 francs to the Armands."

"Rather an expensive present," I said feebly, for my brain was beginning to whirl again.

"Oh, it wasn't intended as a present. The purchaser planned to reclaim it, but Vantine's death threw him out."

"But what was his object? Was he trying to evade the duty?"

"The other cabinet is the one which Vantine really purchased. It was, of course, sent forward to this other fellow's address here in New York. His plan is evident enough—to call upon Vantine as the representative of the Armands or perhaps as the owner of the Montespan cabinet and make the exchange. Vantine's death spoiled that, and he had to make the exchange through you."

"And he accomplished all this by means of a confederate in the employ of the Armands?"

"No doubt of it. The clerk who made the supposed sale to Vantine and got a commission on it resigned suddenly two days ago—just as soon as he had intercepted your cable and answered it. The Paris police are looking for him, but I doubt if they'll find him."

"That's all clear enough," I said, "but what is there about that Boule cabinet which makes this unknown willing to do murder for it? Does he think those letters are still in it?"

"He knows they are not in it now—you told him. Before that he knew nothing about the letters. If he had known of them he would have had them out before the cabinet was shipped."

"What is it, then?" I demanded. "And, above all, Godfrey, why should this fellow hide himself in Vantine's house and kill two men?"

"I see no reason to believe that he was ever inside the Vantine house," said Godfrey quietly. "That is, until you took him there yourself this afternoon."

"That's nonsense. He must have been in the house or he couldn't have killed Vantine and Drouet."

"Who said he killed them?"

"If he didn't kill them, who did?"

"Well," Godfrey answered, "now I'm going to romance a little. We will return to your fascinating friend, Armand, as we may as well call him for the present. He is an extraordinary man. In my opinion he is the greatest criminal of modern times."

"If he is a criminal at all he is undoubtedly a great one," I conceded. "But it is hard for me to believe that he is a criminal. He's the most cultured man I ever met."

"Of course he is. That's why he's so dangerous."

(To be Continued Next Saturday.)

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